

PART 2

a WICKED LOVELY story

A decorative border of stylized green vines and leaves frames the title. The vines curve around the text, with leaves of various shapes interspersed along the stems.

STOPPING TIME

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Stopping Time

Part 2

A Short Story in the World of *Wicked Lovely*

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 HarperCollins e-books

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Stopping Time

—PART 2—

The tangles of panic and fear and guilt hit Irial like an unwelcome banquet. If they were anyone else's fears, it would be a welcomed treat, but the emotions that assailed him were hers. They'd come flooding toward him over his mostly severed connection with Leslie.

No. He hadn't figured her pursuer would enter her classroom. Most mortals didn't escalate from a few calls to a dangerous public scene that quickly.

"Leslie needs help. Get Niall," Irial snarled. "Now."

Mortals paused and shuddered, but they didn't hear. Only faeries heard his order—and he knew that Dark Court faeries would obey as quickly as they had when he was still a king.

He ran to Leslie's classroom; she wasn't there.

Leslie, he called, hoping that the thread that bound them was still alive enough to let her hear him. Once in a while a fleeting moment of connection flared in it. He'd felt her panic. Now he needed to feel *her*, to know where she was. He called louder, *LESLIE*.

The thread that once bound them lay silent.

Irial felt a surge of terror. In the centuries he'd led the Dark Court, Irial had only felt true terror one other time. Then, it had been Niall in danger; then, he had been useless. Now, he felt much the same: she was in danger, and he hadn't been there to stop it.

Abject terror filled him as he ran through the streets seeking her, listening for her voice.

Then he heard her: "Ren, this is a mistake."

Irial moved through the streets toward her voice, and just outside her door, he stopped. Leslie's brother stood with a gun barrel shoved into her side. Irial could smell it, the bitter tang of cold steel. Steel wouldn't kill him, nor would the copper and lead of the bullets inside the weapon. They

would *hurt*, but faeries—especially strong ones—healed from such things. Mortals didn't. Leslie wouldn't.

If she were fey, he could safely pull her out of reach. If she were fey, she'd likely heal from a gunshot. She wasn't.

Should've killed the boy then. He had watched over her, had guards at the ready, yet Ren had escorted her away. *If I'd have killed him then...* Irial winced at the thought of Niall's pain—at *our* pain—if Leslie was hurt by his prior decision to let Ren live.

"I'll remedy that mistake," Irial murmured.

Leslie's hand shook so much that she dropped the key.

Ren smacked her with one hand while keeping the gun steadily pressed into her side. "Pick it up. Don't try anything, Les. Really."

"I don't know how you think this is going to work." She snatched up her keys. "You think my ex is going to just show up?"

Ren gave her an unreadable look. "No. I think you're going to find a way to reach him or one of them—I don't care which of them—and until one of them comes through your door, we'll sit in your dive of an apartment and wait."

She shoved the key in the lock and glared at him. "Then prepare to wait because *unlike you* I don't sacrifice other people to protect myself."

A look of what seemed like regret crossed his face, but it passed in a breath. "We all do what we have to."

Leslie opened the door, and for a brief moment as she stepped inside the building, the gun wasn't against her. It didn't last long enough to be of use.

She jumped as Ren closed the building door.

He gestured with the gun. "Up."

"If I had said the word, he would've killed you," Leslie said.

Ren followed her up the stairs. "Why didn't you?"

"I'm not sure, Ren." She paused on the last stair and glanced back at him. "Because real family protects each other?"

Could I push him down the stairs? Am I fast enough to get away while he falls? Letting him inside her apartment seemed like a sure way to be trapped. *He'll sleep, though.* She thought about it, escaping while he slept, but then just as quickly thought about him jacked up and paranoid. He was terrible when he was strung out.

She shoved as hard as she could with both hands and then she ran.

“Bitch!” Ren cursed and stumbled.

“Pleasepleaseplease.” She jammed the key into her apartment door and slammed it behind her. She threw the bolt with a shaking hand, and then retreated farther into the apartment.

She couldn’t leave. She couldn’t be sure whether he’d shoot through the door. She couldn’t think beyond the fear wrapped around her.

Irial. She started to speak as they once had, but their metaphysical bond was gone—burned away by her own choice.

This isn’t a faery matter.

But it was. If Ren was looking for Irial, if he was looking for Niall, for Gabriel, for her Dark Court family, it did concern them. She pulled out her phone and pressed the button she’d programmed but never dialed, closed her eyes, and waited.

“Leslie.” Relief laced Irial’s voice. “Are you...safe?”

“Did you see him?” she started, and then quickly added, “Don’t come here!”

“Where are you?”

“My apartment,” she said.

“Alone?”

“I am the only one inside my apartment.” She shivered. His voice made her want to cry, even now. *Especially now.* He was every monstrous thing she shouldn’t miss, every nightmare she shouldn’t crave.

“Are you hurt?”

She shook her head, as if he could see. Memories of the way he’d held her when she wept came flooding back. “No,” she whispered.

“Stay inside. I’ll fix this.”

Tears slipped down her cheeks. Hearing his kindness and his darkness made her miss him as intensely as she had those first days after their bond was severed. “Don’t come. He wants to hurt you. Someone told him about you, about faeries. He’s here to...he says he’d let you pay more for his silence, but you can’t trust him. You *can’t*...and I can’t...if you were hurt, if Niall...”

Irial sighed. “My beautiful Shadow Girl...no mortal will hurt me *or* our Niall. I promise.”

A sob escaped her lips. “Ren’s in my building. He has a gun. I should call the police. I couldn’t...if you were hurt...I just...I don’t want him to ever

hurt you, either of you. Neither of you can come in here. Someone else...I can't ask anyone else to either. I just—"

"Hush, now," Irial soothed. "I'll stay exactly where I am. This will be fixed, and neither I nor Niall will be injured."

"Promise?"

"We will not be injured by Ren, and I won't move a step. I promise." Irial's voice was the same comforting croon that had kept her steady when she felt the horrible emotions that he had once funneled through her body.

She whispered, "I wish I was with you instead of here."

Irial didn't hesitate, didn't make her regret her admission. He said, "Talk to me, love. Just talk to me while we wait."

Irial wanted to rip the door from its frame, but to do so would mean that the building would be vulnerable. He stepped away from the doorway to her apartment building as Gabriel and Niall approached.

"Push the button to open the door, Leslie," he said.

She gasped.

"Open the door," he repeated.

"You said you wouldn't move." She pushed the button even as she said it.

"I didn't. I said I wouldn't take a step, and I didn't." Irial put one hand to the window in front of him, wishing he could move, wishing he could be the one to enter her building. He'd promised. He'd assured her that he wouldn't move. He didn't intend to twist his words with either Leslie or Niall if he could help it. If Niall were going in there alone, Irial wouldn't be waiting so calmly, but Niall had Gabriel at his side, and the Hound would keep their king safe.

A weak laugh from Leslie made him smile. "You said 'a step,' didn't you? A lot of steps doesn't break the vow."

"Indeed," he murmured. "My clever girl."

"I couldn't stand playing word games all the time," she said, "but I'll try again. Promise me Ren won't hurt you. Promise me you are safe right now."

Irial watched the Dark King in all of his furious majesty drag Ren into the street. Mortal and faery were invisible as long as Niall had his hands on Ren—and he did. One of Niall's hands was on Ren's throat.

"I am safe, love," Irial promised. "So are you now."

“You always keep me safe, don’t you?” Leslie whispered. “Even when I’m not aware of it, you’re here. I want to tell you that you don’t have to, but—”

“Shush. I needed a hobby now that I have all this free time.” He felt a burst of love in the tattered remains of their connection. “I’m lousy at knitting.”

She sighed. “You need to let go.”

“Never. I’m yours as long as I live. You knew that when you left me.”

In the street between the buildings, Gabriel waited. Oghams appeared on his forearms as the Dark King’s orders became manifest.

For a moment, Leslie was silent. Then, she whispered so low that it was more breath than words, “I’m glad you were here today.”

Gabriel spoke softly enough that Leslie wouldn’t hear him through the phone line: “Is she uninjured?”

“I’ll be here.” Irial walked into the doorway of the building where he had his no-longer-secret apartment and stared up at her window. “But you didn’t need me, did you? You’d already got yourself to safety.”

“If I call the police now...”

Gently, Irial told her, “There’s no one for them to collect, love.”

“Sometimes, I sleep better knowing you...and Niall...” She faltered.

“Love you from a safe distance,” he finished.

“Yes.”

“And we always will. Whatever distance—however far or near you want us—that’s where we will both be as long as we live.” Irial paused, knowing the time was wrong, but not knowing if she’d ever call him again. “Niall will be here tonight. Let him comfort you. Let yourself comfort him.”

Gabriel stood scowling.

Irial held up a hand for silence. “I need to go deal with things. Think about seeing Niall?”

He glanced up at the window where Leslie now stood watching him. When her emotions were this raw, she drew upon their residual connection like a starving thing. He shivered at the feelings roiling inside of her. He couldn’t drink them, not now that she’d cut apart their bond, but he could still feel them.

“I...” Leslie started, but she couldn’t say the words. She put her hand on the window as if to touch him through the glass and distance.

"I know." Irial disconnected and then silently added, *I love you too, Shadow Girl.*

Then he slid the phone into his pocket and stepped up to Gabriel. "Well?"

Extending his arm so Irial could only see part of the orders, Gabriel gestured to the street in front of them. "Walk."

Once they reached the sidewalk café, Irial waited until Gabriel left before taking a seat across the table from his king. When it was just the two of them, he asked, "Shall we try to enjoy lunch? Or do you want to try to reprimand me for the error of my ways?"

The look Niall gave him was assessing. "I'm not sure which of those would please you more."

Irial shrugged. "Both are tempting."

"I asked you to stay away from her." Niall's possessiveness beat against Irial's skin like moth wings.

"I have trouble with authority," Irial said. "She's safe, though, isn't she?"

Niall smiled, reluctantly. "She is. From *him*..."

"Good."

The waitress had already delivered a drink. Niall's allure to mortals did result in superb service. Irial glanced up and a waitress appeared. "Another of these." He pointed at Niall's glass. "Fresh bread. Cheese tray. No menus just now."

Once she was gone, he sat back and waited.

Niall stared at him for several breaths before getting to the inevitable issue. "You gave me your vow of *fealty*."

"True." Irial reached out and took Niall's glass.

When Niall didn't react, Irial drank from it.

The Dark King still didn't respond. So, Irial leaned forward, flipped open the front of Niall's jacket, and retrieved the cigarette case from the inside pocket. To his credit, Niall didn't flinch when Irial's fingers grazed Niall's chest.

Silently, Irial extracted a cigarette, packed it, and held it to his lips.

Niall scowled, but he extended a lighter nonetheless.

Irial took a long drag from the now lit cigarette before speaking. "I'm better at this game, Niall. You can be the intimidating, bad-tempered king to everyone but me. We *both* know that I wouldn't raise a hand to stop you if

you wanted to take all of your tempers out on me. There's only one person I'd protect at your expense...and her life span is but a blink of ours."

"You're addictive to mortals now."

"I know," Irial agreed. "That's why I won't touch her. Not ever again."

"You still love her."

Irial took another drag on his cigarette. "Yet I did the one thing that would assure that I can't be with her. I am quite capable of continuing to love someone"—he caught Niall's gaze—"without touching them. You, of everyone in this world, know that."

As always, Niall was the first to look away. *That* subject was forbidden. Niall might understand now why Irial had not stepped in when Niall offered himself over to the court's abuse centuries ago, but he didn't forgive—not completely.

Maybe in another twelve centuries.

"She is sad," Irial said, drawing Niall's gaze back, "as you are."

"She doesn't want..." The words died before Niall could complete the lie. "She says she doesn't want a relationship with either of us."

Irial flicked his ash onto the sidewalk. "Sometimes you need to accept what a person—or faery—can offer. Do you think I'd come see her if she didn't want me to?"

Niall stilled.

"Every week she is at the same place at the same time." Irial offered back Niall's half-empty glass.

Once Niall took it and drank, Irial continued, "If she wanted to not see me, she'd have only to change one detail. I didn't come one week, and a faery—one whose name I will not share—came in my stead to watch her response. She looked for me. She couldn't focus—and the next week? She was relieved when she saw me. I tasted it."

Niall startled. "I thought that you were...the ink exchange was severed."

"It was severed enough that we are unbound," Irial assured him. "I don't weaken her." He didn't add that Leslie weakened him, that he came to watch her each week so she could do just that. It wasn't conscious on her part, but she drew strength from him. Irial also suspected that his own longevity decreased as hers increased. That wasn't something Niall needed to know.

"You are hiding things." Niall took the cigarette from Irial's hand and crushed it in the ashtray. He slid forward one of the full glasses that a

waitress had wordlessly delivered.

“Nothing that harms Leslie.” Irial accepted the glass. “That’s the only answer you’ll get.”

“Because you don’t want to know how I’ll feel about what you’ve done.” Niall lifted not the untouched glass but the one from which Irial had drunk. “If your actions harm *you*, I would be upset. I hate that it’s true, but it is.”

“I’m glad.” Irial reached out so his hand hovered over Niall’s. He avoided touching the Dark King during such conversations if possible. *Because I am a coward.* “Go see her. I cannot give you what you’d like in this life, but I can promise that I mean her—and you—only happiness.”

“Life was easier before.”

“For you, perhaps. I could taste all of your emotions then,” Irial reminded him. It wasn’t a lie; he *had* been able to taste them. He just didn’t mention that he still could. “You never hated me.”

“It was easier when I thought you didn’t know that.” Niall watched mortals walking along the street. “I still don’t like that you see her.”

“You are my king. You could command me to stop seeing her.”

Niall turned his gaze to Irial. “What would you do?”

“Blind myself, if you were foolish enough to use *those* words.” Irial stood, pulled out a few bills, and tucked them under the ashtray. “If not? Break my oath to you.”

“What good is fealty if I can’t command you?”

“I would follow any order you gave me, Niall, as long as it didn’t endanger Leslie...or you.” Irial emptied the glass. “Ask me to carve out my heart. Tell me to betray our court, the court I’ve lived to serve and protect for longer than you’ve existed, and I would obey you. You are my king.”

The intensity of Niall’s earlier anger was equaled now by hope and fear in even measures.

“You both need me, and”—Irial set the glass down, pushed in his chair, and let the moment stretch out just a bit longer as Niall’s hope overwhelmed his fear—“I will not fail either of you ever again.”

The Dark King didn’t speak, but he didn’t have to: Irial could taste the relief, the confusion, and the growing sliver of contentment.

“Go see her. Be her friend if nothing else. *You* are safe for her to touch now. I made sure of it.” Irial paused. “And Niall? Let her believe it was me who solved her problem.”

Niall’s expression was unwavering; he admitted nothing in look or word.

Irial crouched down in front of him and caught his gaze. “She won’t think less of me for it. It’s you she still sees as tamer than we are. Let her keep that.”

“Why?”

“Because you both need the illusion”—Irial put a hand on Niall’s knee as he stood, testing the ever-changing boundaries—“and because you need each other.”

Niall looked away. “And you.”

Irial lifted one shoulder in a dismissive shrug. “Love works like that.”

For a moment, they simply stared at one another. Then Niall stood, intentionally invading Irial’s space. “It does.”

Irial froze. *An admission?* He stayed as motionless as he could, waiting. “Niall?”

Niall shook his head. “I can’t forget. I wish I could....”

“Me too,” Irial whispered. “I’d give you anything I have to undo the past. I couldn’t protect you. Not from yourself, not from my—”

“*Our*,” Niall interjected.

“*Our* court.” Irial leaned his forehead against Niall’s. “I would, though. Not for a touch. Not for a forgetting. I just want to take away the scars.”

Niall froze, then.

Irial smiled. He reached up to touch the scar on Niall’s face. “Not that you are any *less* for them, but because they mean you were hurt.”

“Regrets are foolish.” Niall smiled, tentatively. “We had other...things I remember too.”

“We did.” Irial hadn’t ever felt as careful, as hopeful, as he’d been these past few months.

“You taste so afraid right now,” Niall whispered. “You gave me all the power. The court, your fealty...”

“You could sentence me to death on a whim.”

“Why?” Niall sounded, in that moment, as young as he’d been when they first met.

“If that’s what would make you finally forgive me—”

“Not *that*...You stood by. You let me offer myself to the court. *You* didn’t hurt me.” Niall shuddered.

“I didn’t stop it either.”

“I forgive you.” Niall’s words were shaky. “I know you don’t understand why I made that bargain. I didn’t understand why you didn’t step in—”

“They’d have killed you,” Irial interrupted. “If I tried to unmake your offer, they’d have killed you, the mortals you were trying to save.... The court wasn’t as orderly then as they are now. They’re not an easy people to rule. If I could’ve talked to you without them knowing, if I could’ve stopped you, if I had told you what you were, if I wasn’t *me*... There are a lot of ifs, love, but the fact is that it was twelve centuries ago. I’ve been doing penance as best I could.”

“And then a few grand gestures since I wasn’t noticing?” Niall laughed. “Give me a court. Give me a way to be with Leslie....”

Irial shrugged. “Some people like grand gestures.”

“I noticed the smaller ones too,” Niall admitted.

Without letting himself think on it too much, Irial leaned in and brushed his lips over Niall’s. It was no more than a feather touch, but he felt both of their hearts race. He stepped away. “Go see her.”

Niall reached out as if he’d touch Irial, but he didn’t close the distance. “Move back into the house?”

Irial stilled. “Into...?”

“Your old room. Not mine.” Niall did reach out then. He put his hand on Irial’s arm. “I can’t offer more, but...”

The hope and fear inside the Dark King were dizzying. It was enough that Irial wasn’t sure which answer Niall really wanted. *Neither is he.*

“Come home?” Niall added.

Irial pressed another kiss, no longer than the last, to Niall’s lips. Then, he pushed him gently away. “Go to her. She needs to be reminded that she is loved.”

Niall didn’t move, so Irial started walking back toward Leslie’s building. He made it several yards before Niall joined him. They walked in silence until they were almost at the door.

“You could take the court back,” Niall said. “I’d give it to you.”

“Then neither of you would be able to have what you need.” Irial frowned. “And it’s not best for the court.”

“If you weren’t addictive—”

“I’d still be unhealthy for her.” Irial shoved him gently toward the building.

Niall didn’t press the button. He lifted his hand, stopped, and lowered it. “Will you be at the house?”

“Yes.” Then Irial walked away.

Leslie paced in her apartment. Some tendril of the vine that connected her to Irial still lived. It wasn't the thing that stole her emotions; it was almost an extra sense that allowed her to taste others' emotions—and to get glimpses of Irial's feelings sometimes.

She knew that he was with Niall: his feelings for Niall were always amplified.

Like mine.

She looked out her front window again. If Irial was with Niall, that meant Niall was near. If he was near...She pushed the thought away. Him, she could speak to. *Not that I should.* With Irial, she had difficulty not simply throwing herself into his arms and letting go. She let herself be near him, but they didn't speak. Talking to Irial would be the first step in not-talking, and mortals who lay down with Gancanaghs became addicted. Unfortunately, knowing that didn't remove the temptation. Knowing didn't help her forget how much pleasure she'd felt when he held her. Her relationship with Niall, on the other hand, had never reached that place, so...

Who am I kidding? She snorted at the rationalization she was indulging in: she shouldn't be alone with either of them. It was why she didn't talk to Irial. It was why she didn't accept five out of six of Niall's calls.

The buzzer for the downstairs door rang. She pushed the speaker on, knowing full well who was there.

"Leslie?"

For a moment, she couldn't speak, but then she asked, "Are you alone?"

"Right now, I am.... Can I come up?"

"You shouldn't."

"Can you come down?"

"I shouldn't either." She'd already had her shoes on, though, and she grabbed her keys from the hook by the door.

She saw him watching her through the front door of the building as she came down the stairs. It wasn't like seeing Irial, not now, not ever. With Irial, she was sure; they knew each other intimately. With Niall, she was still nervous; they'd never moved beyond kisses and what-ifs.

She opened the door—and paused. The awkwardness, the urge to touch and not-touch, the where-does-one-go-now wasn't something they'd figured

out. They both froze, and the moment of greeting passed. Then, it was too late to touch without being *more* awkward.

He stepped to the side, but reflexively offered her his elbow. It was basic civility for him, but he caught himself as soon as he did it. She could see his doubts, his fear that he'd crossed a line already.

Leslie slid her hand into the crook of his arm. "Should I pretend to be surprised?"

He smiled, and all of the tension fled. "Harbingers of my visit or just the fact that I was in town?"

"Did Gabe send for you?" She didn't look around them. "Someone... else?"

"Why didn't you tell me he visits?" Niall's tone was more curious than hurt as he asked.

"Because I want you two to get along," she admitted. "I want...I don't know...I just like the idea that you are at peace with one another. That you can be there for each other."

Niall gave her a curious look.

"What?"

He shook his head. "I'd move the court here if it made you come back to...*either* of us."

"I know." She leaned her head on his shoulder. "And if he thought it would work, he'd be trying to manipulate you to do so. Sometimes I think he wants me in your life more than in his."

Niall paused. "You'd be in both of our lives if—"

"I can't." Leslie's voice wavered embarrassingly.

"So..."

She leaned in and kissed him. "So we take tonight for what it is, and then you return to our court, to him. You need him in your life. I can't live my life in the Dark Court. That's not where I belong."

"Maybe there will be someone else who can be king." He stroked her hair.

"How long was Iri the Dark King?" Leslie kissed his throat. "You know better."

"I want to tell you to be with him," Niall whispered. "He could keep you safe and you'd be away from the court...and maybe someday..."

"You need him with you, and I don't want to be addicted to *anyone*." Leslie wrapped her arms around him, leaned closer into his embrace.

“Sometimes things simply aren’t meant to be. I’m not able to live in the Dark Court. I’d lose myself if I lived there. You might not see that, but I know myself.”

He pulled back and stared into her eyes. “What if—”

“If I thought I could live there, I would,” she interrupted. “Being there with both of you...it’s tempting. More so than I want to admit. I want to ignore the things that happen in the court, not be changed by what I remember. People die. Mortals were killed for sport. Violence is play. Excess is normalcy. I can’t live in that without changing in ways I don’t want to.”

Leslie felt relief at having this conversation finally. She’d expected that she’d be embarrassed by the admission that it wasn’t simple horror that stopped her. *That* she knew Niall would accept, expect even, but her real reason was less honorable. She could accept the cruelty and excess of the Dark Court, and that terrified her.

Niall frowned. “I wish I could lie to you. I want to tell you that none of the horrible things happen anymore.”

“They do. If you aren’t doing the worst of them, he is. Don’t think that he’s changed. He’d do anything to protect you...including protecting you from yourself.” Leslie kept her voice gentle. She knew that there was one time when Irial hadn’t been able to protect Niall, but it wasn’t something any of them discussed. “He will do whatever it takes to keep you happy, so if you aren’t able to do...” Her words faded as Niall looked away.

“I know that there are parts of being the Dark King that he still handles.” Niall’s expression clouded. “I hate being this...almost as much as I enjoy it. Some of the ugly things, though, deals and cruelties...I can’t.”

“So he does.”

Niall nodded. “There are things I don’t see. If we could make it so you didn’t see...”

She ignored that suggestion. “You know what happened with Ren?”

Niall didn’t answer for a moment. Then he nodded. “I do.”

“I want to be sorry. I want to be the sweet girl you think I am. I want to say I’m sorry that Irial”—she paused, trying to find delicate words for what she knew had to have happened—“got rid of Ren.”

For a moment, Niall stared at her. He didn’t speak.

“I’m not that girl,” Leslie admitted. “Any more than you’re Summer Court. You belong in the Dark Court. With Irial.”

“And you.”

“No.” She sighed the word. “The person I would become in the court isn’t who I want to be. I could be. I could be crueler than you are right now. There are reasons that Irial chose me, that I chose his tattoo, and even if you don’t see them, *I do*. If I stay away from the court, I can be something else too.”

“I’ll love you either way,” Niall promised. “He would too.”

“I wouldn’t.” She laced her fingers through his, and they stood there quietly for several moments.

He didn’t look away. Cars passed on the street. People walked by. The world kept moving, but they alone were still.

Finally, he asked, “So should I go?”

“Not tonight. Can we pretend tonight? That you’re not the Dark King? That I’m not afraid of the things I learned about myself in your court? For tonight, can we just be two people who don’t know that tomorrow isn’t ours?” She felt tears on her cheeks. She wasn’t well yet, but she was sure that she couldn’t go back to the world of faeries without destroying all the progress she was making. Maybe if the two faeries she loved were of any other court, she could.

They aren’t. They never will be. And we would’ve never been together if they were.

“What are you saying?” Niall asked.

“I can’t return to the court, but I can’t pretend that you aren’t in my life. I see you. All of you.” Leslie didn’t move any closer to him, but she didn’t back away either. “I need my life to be out here—away from the courts—but I look forward to your calls, to his visits. I want to talk to him, and I want to...”

“What?” Niall prompted.

At the end of the block, Irial stood watching. She’d known he was there, known that he’d be closer if he could, and known that he had made this night possible. She was safe from Ren because of Irial. She was in Niall’s arms because of Irial.

She concentrated on the tendril of connection she had to him, trying to let it open enough to feel him—and for him to feel her emotions. She wasn’t sure if it worked, but he blew her a kiss.

“Leslie?” Niall looked as tentative as he had when they’d first met.

“What do you want?”

“I want you to come upstairs with me. Tonight.”

Irial smiled.

Niall stepped back, but he took her hand in his. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. Give us tonight. Tomorrow”—she looked past him to let her gaze rest on Irial—“tomorrow, you go back to your court, and I continue my life. Tonight, though...”

“I can love without touching.” Niall looked behind him, as if he’d known where Irial was all along, and added, “I learned that lesson centuries ago.”

“Tomorrow you can love me from a safe distance.” Leslie opened the door; then, she looked back at the faery standing in the shadows watching the two of them. “But it’s okay to stop time every so often to be with someone you love.”

Niall paused. “You make it sound so easy.”

“No.” She led him inside. “It’s not easy. Letting you go in the morning will hurt, but I don’t mind hurting a little if it’s for something beautiful.”

A shadow passed through Niall’s eyes.

“He wouldn’t ask you to change who you are, anything between you, if you stopped time *there* either.” Leslie started up the stairs, holding on to Niall’s hand as she did so. “But not tonight.”

“No, not tonight.” Niall kissed her until she was breathless.

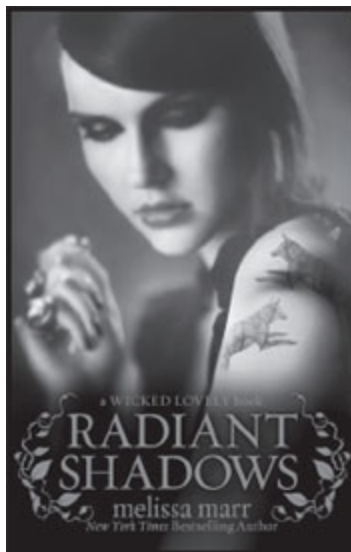
And then they let time—and worries and fears and the rest of the things that meant they couldn’t have forever—stop for the night.

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EPub Edition © February 2010 ISBN: 978-0-06-200745-2

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



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